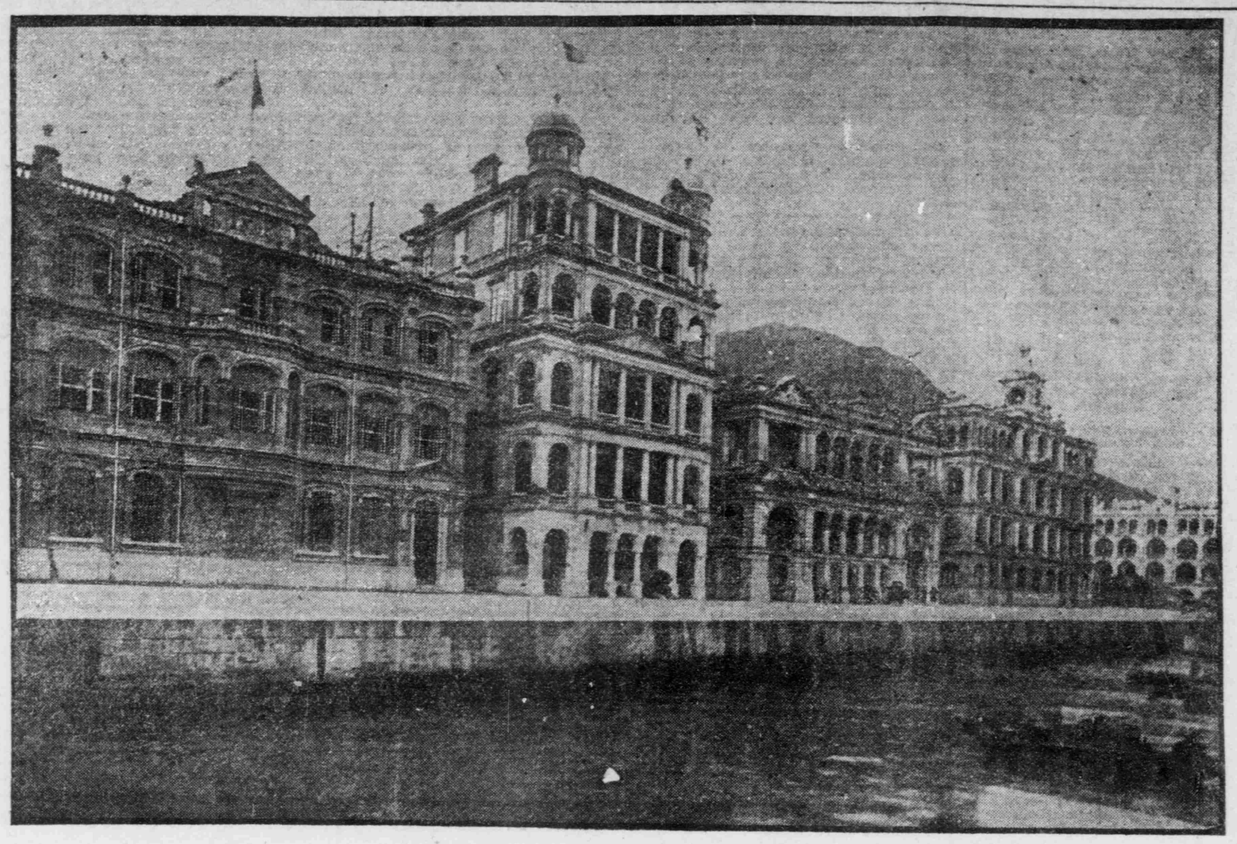
GREAT AWAKENING OF THE FLOWERY KINGDOM

BY WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN.

Radical Changes Which Will Make Government a Constitutional Monarchy—Dowager-Empress Advocates Reform — Prominent Officials Abroad Studying Conditions —Hon. Wu Ting Fang Furnishes Mr. Bryan with a List of Reforms Already Effected —Change in the Alphabet Being Considered.



The Bund Buildings at Hongkong.

Manila, Philippine Islands, Dec. 29, 1905.—In what I have said of the Chinese government, system of education, religion and superstitions, I have referred to the nation as it has been for twenty centuries—chained to tradition, stagnant, asleep. Society was stratified; those in power seemed to have no higher aspiration than to live upon the labor of the masses, and the masses seemed to entertain no thought of emancipation. The life of the people was occupied with ceremony, but there was no genuine fellowship or sympathetic connection between them, outside of the family tie, and even the family was likely to be a storm center because of the conflicting interests collected under one roof. Education was monopolized by a comparative few, and there was no breadth to such instruction as was given. Superstition took the place of religion and the placating of the spirits of the deceased outweighed the nurture and development of those still on earth.

But a change is taking place in China such as has revolutionized Japan within the last half century. The sleeping giantess, whose drowsy eyes have so long shut out the rays of the morning sun, is showing unmistakable signs of awakening. There was a vitality among her people which even 2,000 years of political apathy could not exhaust—a sturdiness which centuries of poverty and superstition could not entirely destroy. Increasing contact with Europe and America is having its influence, and the example of Japan is even more potent, for the people of Japan are not only neighbors, but are more like them in color and race characteristics. Let me note some of the evidences of this change.

The government, so long an absolute despotism, is about to become a constitutional monarchy. In 1898 the emperor, under the influence of some radical reformers, prepared a programme almost revolutionary in its character. Recognizing that his aunt, the dowager empress, would oppose him, he prepared to put her under guard while the change was being made, but the old lady, learning of his plan, promptly took him in hand and made him a prisoner in his own palace. Since that time she has been the unquestioned ruler of the empire, the nominal emperor affixing his signature to the papers which she prepares. But so rapidly has the situation developed that she is now instituting the very reforms for the suggestion of which she so recently imprisoned her nephew. A commission of prominent officials is now abroad, some in Europe, some in America, studying the constitutions and governmental institutions of other countries. What a concession when we remember the self sufficiency of China, the characterization of surrounding nations as "rude tribes," and the use of the term "barbarians" to designate even those with whom she made treaties!

It is reported that the dowager empress recently called her councillors together and asked how long it would take to establish a constitutional government. When told that it would probably require twelve or fifteen years, she replied that it must be done sooner than that, as she could not hope to live much longer and wanted it in operation before she died. Whether she appreciates the full importance of the change may be doubted, but the fact that the great nations, with the exception of Russia, have constitutions has doubtless made its impression upon her, and Russia's defeat at the hands of the Japanese, coupled with the present internal disturbances in the czar's domain, contains its lesson.

As early as 1901 a commission was appointed to examine and report on all proposed measures affecting the organization and administration of the government, and in 1904 a general assembly of the ministers of the principal boards was provided for. While these newly created bodies have no legislative power, they indicate the trend toward a more popular government. The constitution, when adopted, as it ultimately will be, will inaugurate a parliamentary system. There is, therefore, a distinct advance along governmental lines, and this in itself means much for China and for the outside world.

A revision of the criminal code is also being perfected. The Hon. Wu Ting Fang, former minister to the United States, and now vice president of the board of foreign affairs, has been made a member of the board of punishments. He and Shen Chai Pen, the vice president of the board of punishments, have by imperial decree been intrusted with the revision and codifying of the laws of China. They have established a bureau with a staff of secretaries and translators, and have spent two years in the examination of the civil and criminal codes of the different countries in order to select laws which are applicable to the conditions existing in China. Ex-Minister Wu has taken a deep interest in the subject and kindly furnished me with the following list of reforms to which the imperial sanction has been secured.

1.—Ling Chi, slow death by slicing to pieces, has been abolished. It was the punishment formerly prescribed to one found guilty of paracide, high treason, wilful murder of husband (the murder of husband by wife was according to Chinese law a much graver offense than the murder of wife by husband.)

2.—The heads of criminals were formerly exposed to the public after execution. This has been abolished.

3.—The beheading of a corpse of a criminal who died before execution is no longer permitted.

4.—According to the old law, parents, relatives and friends of those convicted of serious crimes were subject to punishment; now the punishment is confined to the guilty party. (While the practice of including innocent relatives in the sentence seems barbarous in the extreme it was, after all, not so different in principle from the practice of the western nations which, in times of war, inflict punishment indiscriminately upon innocent and guilty alike.)

5.—The branding of criminals has been abandoned.

6.—Corporal punishment of criminals is also abolished.

7.—The torturing of accused persons during trial, except where the accused is charged with murder, and where the evidence of guilt is clear, has also been abolished. According to the Chinese law, a person convicted of murder cannot be put to death until he confesses, and torture has been retained in a case of this kind as a means of compelling confession when the guilt has been otherwise established, but Mr. Wu expresses the hope that torture in such cases will be abolished in the near future.

The revision commission has also succeeded in obtaining an imperial decree ordering the construction of more modern prisons, requiring the inspection of prisoners and compelling humane treatment. Formerly relief from cruel treatment could only be secured by paying the official in charge.

The commission is now working upon a code of procedure and intends, among other things, the recommendation of a system of trial by jury, the admission of lawyers to practice in the courts and the relieving of prisoners and witnesses from the humiliating practice of kneeling in court.

In order to secure competent judges and lawyers for the carrying out of the new code, the commission have obtained the sanction of the government for the establishment of a law school at Peking (the site has already been purchased), and the high schools and colleges of the various provinces have been instructed to add law to the curriculum of their studies.

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Minister Wu called attention to other reforms that have been introduced into China within the last few years, among which may be mentioned the construction of railways, the establishment of a government board of commerce, the formation of a police force, municipal and provincial, the promulgation of incorporation laws and the establishment of mints.

At first the railroads were built by concessions issued to foreign companies but because of the constant difficulties which grew out of such concessions, there is a growing sentiment in favor of government railroads. It was in the pursuance of this policy that the government acquired the rights of the American company which was projecting a road from Hankow to Canton. Some of the Americans residing in China have expressed regret that this road should have passed out of American hands, but I am satisfied that it is better for the United States that China should own the road than that it should be in the hands of foreigners or even in the hands of Americans. It would be impossible to operate the road without more or less friction, which would involve the countries in diplomatic controversies. If China operates the road herself, we will have equal rights with foreigners without the risks involved in private ownership. And, speaking of roads, the city of Peking is passing through an era of street improvement. Some eleven miles of pavement has been laid within three years, and concrete sidewalks are making their appearance.

The finances of China have been in a miserable condition. Cash is the money in common use, and these brass coins, running about 1,000 to the dollar, are too heavy for any excepting the smallest transactions. Think of doing business with money so heavy that you must carry 100 pounds of money to make a $10 purchase! Some complained of silver in the United States because of its weight, but the silver certificate completely answered this argument, for a silver certificate is as convenient as a gold certificate, and more convenient than gold coin; but in China they had no paper substitute. The monetary unit is called a tael and, if coined, would weigh about one and one-third times the Mexican dollar, but no coins of this denomination are in circulation. The Mexican dollar is in common use, and in some of the provinces there are fractional silver coins. But the Mexican dollar is so often counterfeited that it is customary to test each coin as it passes from hand to hand. I secured oone of the "three piece dollars" as they are called. These are made by sawing a thin disc from each side of the dollar; the silver is then removed from the center and the cavity filled with lead and the two faces soldered on. The work is done so skillfully that the counterfeit can only be detected by the ring. Several of the banks issue paper notes payable in Mexican dollars, but these are discounted in the various cities so that a traveler's currency is always undergoing a shave. The government has decided to establish a uniform system of currency, consisting of gold, silver and copper, the silver tael to remain the unit.

Patent laws and trade mark laws are now being prepared; in fact, China is being quickened in many ways by the increasing knowledge which she is acquiring of the ways of western civilization. They are even considering a change in the alphabet and characters in order that the language may be more easily learned.

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I have already referred to the fact that China has until recently been practically without newspapers. There is no better evidence of the progress which China is making than is to be found in the increase in the number of her newspapers. While the circulation of these papers is small as compared with the circulation of similar papers in the United States and Japan, still the growth is constant and the colloquial dialect sometimes employed brings the news and editorial pages within the comprehension of those who cannot read books. Many of these newspapers are published in the interest of reforms. One of the papers started at Hongkong opposes the examination system by which civil officials were selected, the foot-binding custom and the habit of wearing a queue. The editor cut off his own queue as an example and is now encouraged by the fact that the soldiers are gradually adopting a like course. He is also able to note progress in the matter of foot-binding. An imperial edict has been issued exhorting the people to abandon the practice, and numerous societies are engaged in spreading literature upon this subject.

But more important still is the recent abolition of the examinations. This is a revolution that has shaken the ancient empire to its foundation, for the examination system not only affected the government, but molded the educational system as well. In the larger cities elaborate provisions were made for these examinations, in some places from 10,000 to 15,000 stalls being constructed. These stalls were about three feet wide by six feet deep and high enough to permit the student to stand erect. The only furniture was a board for a seat and another for a desk. At a given hour the students entered these stalls, were given their themes and kept in their stalls without communication until their tasks were finished. Now the stalls stand idle and the officials are chosen from the graduates of the newly established schools.

We visited the examination stalls at Peking and found them in ruins. They had been occupied by the Boxers in 1900, and the rafters were torn out and used for fuel. After the roofs had fallen in, the unprotected walls rapidly crumbled.

The conservatives have been very much incensed by the abandonment of the examinations, but the reformers regard it as a long step in the right direction.

On every hand one sees signs of intellectual development. As stated in another article, the private school was for centuries the only source from which instruction in books could be gained. Now a complete system of schools is being established, consisting of primary, middle and high schools, with colleges in the larger cities. Viceroy Yuan Shih Kai, who presides over the district in which Peking is situated, and whom, through the courtesy of Minister Rockhill, I had an opportunity to meet, informed me that he had established 3,000 schools within his jurisdiction within the past four years. The viceroy is the successor of Li Hung Chang and is considered the most influential man in the empire. He is about 46 years old and impresses ons as a man of great mental vigor and alertness. He seems to take a deep interest in the reforms now being worked out and is cordial in his treatment of Americans.

Consul General Rodgers of Shanghai happened to be in Nanking during our visit there, and we paid our respects to Viceroy Chou Fu. This viceroy is quite old and feeble, but he is grappling with the new problems and is a patron of education. He has established 1,000 schools during the last few years and estimated the number of Chinese students in Japan at this time at 5,000.

At Shanghai there is a government university, the buildings of which cost $210,000. We learned that in some places Buddaist temples were being converted into schools; that girls' schools are already being provided for. This is even a greater evidence of progress than the opening of schools for boys, because of the inferior position which woman has occupied in the Celestial empire.

Besides the government schools there are numerous missionary schools in which instruction is given to both boys and girls. We visited some of these schools at Peking, Nanking and Shanghai, and found the instructors encouraged by the attendance and the interest taken. A number of Americans and a still larger number of Japanese are teaching in the government schools.

But enough has been said to indicate the regeneration through which the Flowery kingdom is passing. What will be the effect of the change upon the world? Who is wise enough to peer into the future and outline the record of the next century? Japan furnishes the nearest parallel. Compare the Japan of fifty years ago with the Japan of today and some conception can be formed of China fifty years hence. As Japan's commerce increased, so is China's commerce increasing; as Japan sent statesmen abroad to investigate the methods of other governments, so China is now sending inquirers abroad; as Japan turned her attention to schools and colleges, so China is learning the advantage of universal education; as Japanese students journeyed into distant lands in search of knowledge, so Chinese students are in increasing numbers studying in foreign colleges. Even in the enlargement and training of her army she is patterning after Japan and employing Japanese drill masters.

It need not be thought strange that there is an anti-foreign sentiment in China. Was there not an anti-foreign sentiment in Japan forty years ago? The Shimoneski affair was not unlike the Boxer trouble, except that it was less fatal to life, but it exerted a large influence in the overthrow of the Shogun and in the restoration of the emperor. Just as in Japan the old family gave way to the new and progress took the place of stagnation, so in China the old must give way to the new.

Advance is inevitable and the world need not fear the result. If China were strong enough to give effect to the hostility which some of her people now feel, she might be a menace to the peace of the world, but she cannot grow in strength faster than she grows in knowledge, and as she grows in knowledge she will learn, as other nations have learned, that nations help rather than injure each other by the material, intellectual and moral development of their people.

W. J. BRYAN.